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Identity and Difference in a post-dialectical Theory: on Theodor W. Adorno's Paris Lectures

*Alain-Patrick Olivier**

Abstract: How should we think of identity and difference in a post-dialectical way? Adorno is usually considered as a theoretician of otherness, whereby otherness is taken as the opposite to identity. I present in this paper the position of Adorno and the way he thought the topics of “identity” and “difference” in his 1961 Paris Lectures, those lectures given at the College de France which are sketches of his “Negative Dialectics”. Adorno’s purpose is to criticize the main philosophical conception based on a philosophy of identity – in order to make clear its political implications. In the post-World War II situation, this political reflexion was connected with an educational project regarding the education of citizen in the time of late capitalism in order to avoid a relapse into barbarism.

Keywords: Dialectics. Difference. Ontology. Negative dialectics.

Identité et différence chez la théorie post-dialectique : sur les cours parisiennes de Theodor W. Adorno

Résumé: Comment penser l’identité et la différence dans un cadre post-dialectique ? Adorno est généralement considéré comme un penseur de l’altérité, où l’altérité est comprise comme opposée à l’identité. Le présent article examine la position d’Adorno et la façon dont il traite des questions de « l’identité » et de la « différence » dans ses conférences de Paris données au Collège de France en 1961, qui constituaient l’esquisse de sa *Dialectique négative*. Le but d’Adorno est de critiquer la conception philosophique dominante basée sur le concept d’identité afin d’en montrer les implications politiques. Dans la situation de l’après-guerre mondiale, cette réflexion politique était liée à un projet d’éducation concernant l’éducation du citoyen à l’époque du capitalisme tardif pour éviter une rechute dans le barbarisme.

Mots-cles: Dialectique. Différence. Ontologie. Dialectique négative.

Identidade e diferença na teoria pós-dialética: sobre as conferências parisienses de Theodor W. Adorno

Resumo: Como pensar a identidade e a diferença em um contexto pós-dialético? Adorno é geralmente considerado um pensador da alteridade, sendo a alteridade compreendida como oposta à identidade. Este artigo examina a posição de Adorno e a forma como ele trata as questões da “identidade” e da “diferença” em suas conferências de Paris, proferidas no Collège de France em 1961, e que constituem o esboço de sua *Dialética Negativa*. O objetivo de Adorno é o de criticar a concepção filosófica dominante baseada no conceito de identidade para mostrar suas implicações políticas. Na situação mundial do pós-guerra, tal reflexão política estava ligada a um projeto de educação concernente à educação do cidadão na época do capitalismo tardio para evitar uma recaída no barbarismo.

Palavras-chave: Dialética. Diferença. Ontologia. Dialética negativa.

In March 1961 Theodor W. Adorno was invited at the College de France in Paris to give three lectures. The general title of those lectures was “Dialectique et Ontologie” (“Dialectics and Ontology”). They are the first sketches of the book *Negative Dialektik* [*Negative Dialectics*] that was

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published in 1966. They allow us in that sense to follow the process of composition of the book and to better understand its structure. The lectures were given in French language after a German original, which was previously translated. The title of the three lectures are:

- 1) Le besoin ontologique (= “the ontological need” = Part 1 of the book)
- 2) Etre et existence (= “being and existence” = Part 1)
- 3) Vers une dialectique négative (= “towards a negative dialectics” = Part 2)

Adorno used the extended German version to write the first and second part of *Negative Dialektik* (I. “Relation to ontology”, II. “Negative Dialectics : concepts and categories”. Part three “Models” is not related to the Parisian Lectures). In the context of the world-wide celebrations of the publication of that book, the lectures provide a rich material concerning the genesis of that work. The text of the Parisian Lectures is unpublished yet and was not exploited by researchers¹.

My purpose is first to present an extract of the conferences, namely the third lecture that is also present in a similar form with some alterations in the *Negative Dialectics*, where Adorno is explicitly dealing with “Dialectics of Identity”. I am providing here this short text in in four versions:

- the German text of the Parisian lectures after the Frankfurt manuscript
- the French text of the Parisian lectures, which was pronounced by Adorno in 1961
- the German text of “Negative Dialectics” from 1966
- the English translation of “Negative Dialectics” from 1973

The title of this paper is: “Identity and Difference in a post-dialectical Theory”. When I am speaking of a “post-dialectical way of thinking”, I am referring to the philosophical way opened with the idea of a “negative dialectics” as a way of thinking dialectically after the end of the Hegelian or Marxist-Leninist dogmatic conception of dialectics. The matter of my presentation is the concepts of “identity” and “difference” or “otherness”. How should we think of identity and difference in a post-dialectical way? Within the frame of what Adorno called a “negative dialectics”?

My purpose on a philosophical point of view is namely to show that the philosophy of Adorno offers us a logical and a political reflexion on the concepts of identity and difference from a dialectical perspective which differs a) from the conception of Heidegger and from Hegel on one side, b) which differs also from the later French Theory on the other. I will therefore first present the general frame of this problematic (I), then comment the short abstract from Adorno regarding the category of “difference” (II).

I would like to show that Adorno’s enquiry about identity and difference could be useful for the contemporary discussion about “identity” and “difference” in a philosophical and logical as well as in a political point of view. I am personally interested into the way which Adorno is dealing with these

¹ I am currently working on an edition project with the Theodor W. Adorno Archive in Frankfurt am Main.

categories concerning a research project on the policy of difference and pluralism in France and in Brazil, especially in education. It is to support the politics of emancipation especially of black people and other minorities through the access to education. But we also have to discuss the philosophical background for such a politics and to ask if the French Theory and its conception of “différence” (“otherness”) for example by Deleuze is the only way.

The question is: can we speak about “otherness” without speaking of “identity”? Is it possible to use the category of “otherness” as an autonomous concept? And then: is it possible to think a politic of otherness which is not an identity politic?

Adorno is usually considered as a theoretician of otherness, whereby otherness is taken as the opposite to identity. But what is the relation between the concept of otherness and the concept of difference? Can we imagine a form of otherness which is not mediated? Which is not part of a logic of identity? what is the relation between identity and difference in a philosophy of otherness?

I would like to show that Adorno is also a theoretician of the identity. The alternative he suggests to the philosophy of identity is not only a philosophy of otherness, but it is a critical approach of the identity. We can not escape the identity but we have to refer critically and dialectically to the notion of “identity”. We have then to use the category of “dialectics” even not in a Hegelian sense (where “alterity, difference are asserted but only as secondary moments serving their opposite”²). That is why Adorno is speaking of “negative dialectics”.

The main difference between Adorno and French Theory is that Adorno, with the “Negative Dialectics”, wants to save not only the Hegelian Philosophy in general but the very notion of “dialectics” that the French philosophers wanted to eliminate at that time. Deleuze has built his philosophy of difference or otherness to escape the Hegelian dialectics. Adorno criticized radically the Hegelian dialectic – which is part of the identitarian philosophy – but wanted also to use it for a new logic of identity or otherness in a non-identitarian way.

1. General remarks

The main purpose of Adorno in the Parisian lectures is not to criticize Hegel. It is to criticize the very philosophy of identity, the philosophy of being – in order to make clear its political implications, especially the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. In the post-World War II situation, this political reflexion was connected with an educational project regarding the education or re-education of citizen in the time of late capitalism in order to avoid a relapse into barbarism.

Adorno shows how the political engagement in fascism by Heidegger is inherent to the form and the content of his philosophy of being. When we are thinking about the relationship between

² Zizek, S., *Less Than Nothing: Hegel and the Shadow of Dialectical Materialism*, p. 262.

philosophy and politics we can not avoid a critic of the philosophy itself, its logical structure, its connection to the law of identity.

The argumentation of Adorno is still echoing currently since the most radical French philosophers today, like Badiou, still refer to Heidegger and his philosophy of being as disconnected of any political implication. This connection between philosophy and fascism is still embarrassing even because the fascination for the Heideggerian ontology not decrease since the 1960s.

The alternative is not to only prohibit this philosophy, to escape this kind of metaphysics or to enter uncritically in this dispositive. A lot of critics concerning Heidegger's commitment in national-nationalism are journalistic or historical critics. But there is a way to approach and to criticize the structure of this metaphysics from inside, from a philosophical point of view.

That is the way Adorno is criticizing the ontology of Heidegger: he connects the every day fascination for fascism with the very principle of a philosophy of being. He tries to explain where the "besoin ontologique" is coming from, he wants to deal with this irrational demand in rational terms. This implies not only to refer to psychological and social explanations but also to follow the internal logic of the philosophy of being and its mythological structure.

This is what Adorno is doing in the first lecture about the "besoin ontologique" and then, in the second, about "être et existence". The "besoin critique" ("critical need"?) appears as the alternative and response to the "besoin ontologique". The question is not to dismiss the ontology, the metaphysics and even the philosophy – as pure ideology – but to develop it in dialectical form. "Negative dialectics" is the name for this new critique of metaphysics. The "negative dialectics" has to show the authoritarian structure of the philosophy of identity and to avoid it. But Adorno's critics don't stop at this point.

(i) The first point is that he considers the danger for the "negative dialectics" to pose itself as an identitarian philosophy. The danger is to replace an identitarian philosophy of being by what can be seen as an identitarian philosophy of "negative dialectics". The critics take in so far the shape of a self-critic.

(ii) The second point is that the structure of thinking itself is an identitarian structure, so that we can not escape the structure of the identity. Even the fragmentary structure of thinking relates to an inherent form of *Geschlossenheit*. (in French : "construction close", in the English translation I am not sure if "conclusive form" is adequate, I would speak of "cohesion"). This is what Adorno shows in the abstract about the "dialectics of identity" both in the Parisian Lectures and in *Negative Dialektik*.

2. The "Dialectics of identity" in the Parisian Lectures

In his Parisian Lectures Adorno is writing:

« Autant la dialectique négative est-elle liée, comme point de départ, aux catégories suprêmes dans lesquelles se termine la philosophie d'identité, autant est-elle fautive et, d'après la logique de l'identité, est-elle même ce à quoi elle s'oppose. Elle doit se corriger dans sa progression critique dévorant aussi les notions qu'elle traite selon leur forme, comme si pour elle, elles étaient encore les primaires. Il s'agit d'une différence décisive lorsqu'une pensée, contrainte par la nécessité inhérente à toute pensée, se laisse assujettir de façon close et principielle pour suffire à l'exigence d'une construction close, revendiquée par la philosophie traditionnelle qui la dément, – ou lorsqu'elle impose affirmativement par elle-même cette forme de clôture, en se faisant inconditionnellement une chose primaire. »

A first result of this quotation is quite pessimistic and puzzling. It seems that the “negative dialectics”, if Adorno is right, can not escape the logic of the identity. The reason is that the “identitarian logic” is part of any form of “thinking”; there is a “compulsion of the form”. The “negative dialectics” is only possible within the shape of an identitarian logic.

The other upsetting result is that there is not necessary a great difference between the Heideggerian philosophy of being and the Adornian conception of negative dialectics. One can say the “negative dialectics” is simply another form of identitarian philosophy substituting the “supreme” categories of the identitarian philosophy like “being”, “identity” by other “primary” categories like “negation”, “critic”, “dialectic”, “otherness”, “difference”.

But Adorno provides this argument that the function of the “negative dialectics” is not to provide categories, new categories, but to criticize categories, the categories of the identitarian philosophy but also the very categories it has produced. “It must correct itself in its critical course”.

That is why Adorno distinguishes very clearly in the second part of the text two sort of thinking: the “negative dialectics” and the “identitarian logic” and there is a “différence décisive” (a decisive difference) between them.

The first possibility (A) is a way of thinking within the frame of the identitarian logic because there is no other issue as the *Geschlossenheit*. La pensée “se laisse assujettir”. The thinking is in a position of “subjection”. But this position of subjection can also be a position of opposition and of negation. At the same time one can also “deny” the authoritarian form of identitarian philosophy. The categories of the identitarian logic can simply be criticized. It is not simply to escape these categories or to bring new ones (like “otherness”, “difference”) but to be involved in a critical process from the point of view of the dominated. The relationship to identity is not affirmation but negation. (If I would translate in a political way, I would say: there is no possibility to escape the fascism or the capitalism, i.e. totalitarianism, but we can negate and criticize them. We have to fight racism).

The second possibility (B) is the position of the identitarian philosophy, which “impose affirmativement par elle-même cette forme de cloture” (*Geschlossenheit*). The identitarian logic consists in the process of affirmation. This process excludes the critical one. The way of thinking is

related to fix categories, to primary categories (like being, etc.) This is not only to recognize the necessity of the identity but to emphasize it and to redouble it in a kind of what I would call a form of “over-identity” which becomes an authoritarian way of thinking. (If I translate in a political way, I would say: we can not escape the fascist structure of capitalism, so we have to follow and to develop this fascist structure.)

The implication of this is that a philosophy of the difference, a philosophy of otherness is not necessary a “different philosophy” or an “alternative philosophy” to the philosophy of identity. The question is not simply the autonomization of “difference” as such, of “otherness” as to be opposed to the category of identity, or to the category of contradiction. The main difference is not between identitarian logic and philosophy of otherness but between critical or non-critical philosophy and furthermore between dialectical and non-dialectical philosophy. We can not simply emphasize the category of “otherness” without a critical process, otherwise the risk is to produce a new identitarian logic and even authoritarian politics. But there is always the need to criticize in a dialectical way the point of view of the identitarian logic.

Conclusion

In this way, Adorno’s post-dialectical thinking can be very actual and productive for us in a philosophical and in political horizon when we are debating about identity and otherness. We would have then to distinguish between a critical theory of otherness (a dialectical one) and a non-critical and non-dialectical theory of otherness which can be - regarding the form – similar to the theory of identity we wanted to escape from. I hope “Negative Dialectics” and the Parisian Lectures could help us in this way of thinking and criticizing our philosophical and political categories.

Text

Zur negativen Dialektik (1961)

Soweit negative Dialektik, als an ihrem Ausgang, gebunden ist an die obersten Kategorien, in denen die Identitätsphilosophie terminiert, ist auch sie falsch, identitätslogisch, selber das, wogegen sie sich zuspitzt. Korrigieren muß sie sich in ihrem kritischen Fortgang, der auch Begriffe verzehrt, die sie der Form nach behandelt, als wären es auch für sie noch die ersten. Zweierlei ist es, ob ein Denken, durch die Not der allen Denken eigentümlichen Form, geschlossen, prinzipiell sich fügt, um den Anspruch der traditionellen Philosophie auf geschlossenes Gefüge sich zu stellen, den sie verneint – oder ob sie jene Form der Geschlossenheit von sich aus affirmativ setzt, ihrer Intention nach sich selbst zum Ersten macht.

Vers une dialectique négative (1961)

Autant la dialectique négative est-elle liée, comme point de départ, aux catégories suprêmes dans lesquelles se termine la philosophie d'identité, autant est-elle fautive et, d'après la logique de l'identité, est-elle même ce à quoi elle s'oppose. Elle doit se corriger dans sa progression critique dévorant aussi les notions qu'elle traite selon leur forme, comme si pour elle, elles étaient encore les premières. Il s'agit d'une différence décisive lorsqu'une pensée, contrainte par la nécessité inhérente à toute pensée, se laisse assujettir de façon close et prinzipielle pour suffire à l'exigence d'une construction close, revendiquée par la philosophie traditionnelle qui la dément, – ou lorsqu'elle impose affirmativement par elle-même cette forme de clôture, en se faisant inconditionnellement une chose première.

Negative Dialektik (1966)

Dadurch ist die negative Dialektik, als an ihrem Ausgang, gebunden an die obersten Kategorien von Identitätsphilosophie. Insofern bleibt auch sie falsch, identitätslogisch, selber das, wogegen sie gedacht wird. Berichtigen muß sie sich in ihrem kritischen Fortgang, der jene Begriffe affiziert, die sie der Form nach behandelt, als wären es auch für sie noch die ersten. Zweierlei ist, ob ein Denken, durch die Not der einem jeglichen unentrinnbaren Form, geschlossen, prinzipiell sich fügt, um den Anspruch der traditionellen Philosophie auf geschlossenes Gefüge immanent zu verneinen - oder ob es jene Form der Geschlossenheit von sich aus urgiert, der Intention nach sich selbst zum Ersten macht.

Negative Dialectics (1973)

Negative dialectics is thus tied to the supreme categories of identitarian philosophy as its point of departure. Thus, too, it remains false according to identitarian logic: it remains the thing against which it is conceived. It must correct itself in its critical course—a course affecting concepts which in negative dialectics are formally treated as if they came “first” for it, too. It is one thing for our thought to close itself under compulsion of the form which nothing can escape from, to comply in principle, so as immanently to deny the conclusive structure claimed by traditional philosophy; and it is quite another thing for thought to urge that conclusive form on its own, with the intent of making itself “the first.”

(Translated by E.B. Ashton)

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